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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 001388

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SUBJECT: MAYOR GARZON'S UNEVENTFUL FIRST MONTH IN OFFICE

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.5 B & D.

¶1. (C) Summary: Leftist Bogota mayor Luis Eduardo "Lucho" Garzon's first month in office was largely uneventful. Garzon has not attempted to steal President Uribe's limelight, and has been virtually silent on security issues. Instead, Garzon has talked up social issues. Thus far, however, he has not implemented any new programs. Garzon is acting in a far more responsible and measured fashion than many pundits would have predicted. His pre-inauguration visit to Cuba, however, did make headlines. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Garzon's January 1 acceptance speech was conciliatory and measured. While recognizing his roots in the political left, Garzon described himself as all-inclusive and stressed "I do not polarize." Garzon offered to work with President Uribe on public security and promotion of rule of law. He explicitly stated that Bogota was not an independent "republic" and that Uribe was the nation's president. He promised new avenues for citizen participation and enhanced efforts to combat corruption. Garzon also welcomed foreign investment. Garzon criticized, however, Colombia's antiquated system of fiscal federalism, and promised to do more on the social side, in spite of tight finances. He reiterated his campaign pledge to de-emphasize the "day without a vehicle" policy (established by law in an effort to reduce pollution) in favor of a "day without hunger" policy.

¶3. (C) In a February 4 meeting with poloffs, Garzon's private secretary (chief of staff equivalent), Edgar Ruiz, welcomed the recent formation of a pro-Garzon majority coalition in the city council and said it demonstrated the breadth of support for Garzon's socioeconomic agenda. Ruiz noted that Bogota's finances are sound (with a very small deficit), a fact that would permit Garzon to offer additional spending on education and programs for the needy such as promised soup kitchens. Ruiz added that Garzon's plan is to levy additional consumption taxes on the upper strata (telephone and electricity usage, for example) to provide extra resources. Ruiz stressed that Garzon ceded public security issues to President Uribe and planned to focus on improving social conditions in Bogota.

¶4. (C) Garzon's pre-inauguration (late December) trip to Havana did garner headlines locally and internationally. Garzon advisor Daniel Garcia-Pena told PolCouns last month that Garzon's encounter with Fidel Castro was hastily arranged by the latter once Garzon was already on the island. However, we have also heard the opposite. Since taking office, Garzon has traveled only to Brazil to attend a municipal forum. While there he also met with President De Silva. According to Ruiz, Garzon hopes to visit the U.S. (most likely Miami) and Europe in either March or April.

¶5. (C) Comment: Garzon's first month was a smooth ride. Garzon is a savvy politician, and is cognizant of President Uribe's 80 percent approval rating and excellent marks on public security. He is unlikely to make waves on that front. While he is prohibited from running for president in 2006, Garzon certainly is interested in Colombia's highest office, and needs to have a strong record of accomplishment in Bogota, a generally conservative city. He is fortunate to have inherited a city that benefited from a decade (two terms of Antanas Mockus and one of Enrique Penalosa) of efficient management. He has also inherited some ongoing public infrastructure projects which he will be able to inaugurate while in office. We expect him to put his nose to the grindstone, attempting to improve infrastructure as well as socioeconomic conditions for the impoverished masses on Bogota's periphery. He will have his work cut out for him, considering Bogota's high unemployment rate and public education deficit (an estimated 100,000 local children are not in school).

WOOD